

Book Review: Narrating Conflict in the Middle East: Discourse, Image, and Communications Practices in Lebanon and Palestine

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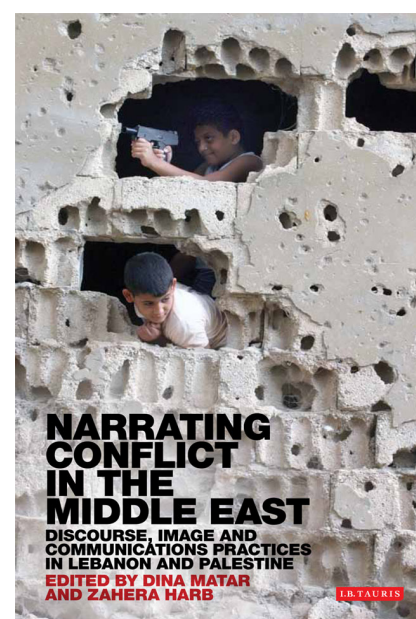
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*In this book the contributors set out to examine the ways in which conflicts in Palestine and Lebanon have been and are narrated, imagined and remembered in diverse spaces, including that of the media. **Narrating Conflict in the Middle East** makes an effective relation of the concepts of power and discourse to contemporary art, movies and representations in both the Palestinian and Lebanese public spheres, writes **Alexei Anisin**.*



Narrating Conflict in the Middle East: Discourse, Image, and Communications Practices in Lebanon and Palestine. Dina Matar and Zahera Harb (Editors). I.B.Tauris. May 2013.

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How much political influence do external states have in the Palestinian and Lebanese conflicts? How do everyday citizens express their political views in these restricted media markets? In *Narrating Conflict in the Middle East: Discourse, Image, and Communications Practices in Lebanon and Palestine*, a twelve chapter multi-collabrotatory effort has been put forward by experts to explain a variety of important topics relevant to contemporary international relations with specific emphasis placed on the Middle Eastern region. The construction and narration of conflicts in both the Lebanese and Palestinian nations are shown to be influenced by global-forces and foreign governments. Through focusing on the concept of meaning found in everyday representational forms of art, movies and communicational outlets, the authors shed light on various discourses and hegemonic forces that have shaped the long fought ideological battles in this region.

This theoretical approach departs from what are argued to be previously vague and broad approaches that missed out on important underlying cultural and power dynamics. Although small nation states, both Lebanon and Palestine have been at the centre of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict over the past century given their closely intertwined relations with Israel and strategic placing in the Middle East. By overviewing a few chapters from this work I will illustrate that its most significant contribution can be found in the effective relation of the concepts of power and discourse to contemporary art, movies and representations in both the Palestinian and Lebanese public spheres.

In the second chapter, Matt Sienkiewicz develops a new theoretical concept highlighting a phenomenon he refers to as “censorscape,” where a given nation or social group’s representation in regional, national, and international contexts experiences the influence of powerful external forces that construct hegemonic narratives within that state’s

discourse. This then disables the representation of opposing sectors of civil society. Sienkiewicz examines the specific context of the Palestinian media sector, which he refers to as a “prison-like” space. A major obstacle for film makers in Palestine lies not only with logistical problems in terms of setting up modern communicational hubs, but in censorship problems that stem from external influences. The Palestinian government, Arab program buyers, Israeli media watchdogs and Western funded organizations all consistently exert their influence on the Palestinian public sphere through film and media. Sienkiewicz in this chapter does an excellent job of theorizing the concept of censorscape in relation to previous literature on Palestinian media by illustrating how these external forces actually play a bigger role in influencing Palestine than previously imagined. The example of U.S. State department funding film maker Saleem Dabbour’s film “[Spiderwebs](#)” provides strong warrant for Sienkiewicz’s argument.

In



West Bank Wall, Palestine. Credit: [Wanderlass](#). CC BY-NC 2.0

the second section of the book, “Discourse”, Atef Alshaer contributes a chapter that provides an interesting account of the role Islam plays in the narratives behind Fatas and Hamas, which both have battled for Palestinian political supremacy over a great span of years. Alshaer’s interpretation of the term discourse aligns with Michel Foucault’s use of discourse in which discourses can be viewed to be “paradigms of knowledge and authority” that get situated through language in all periods of societal and governmental existence. The discourse behind the political party Fatah when compared to Hamas differs substantially, yet as Alshaer illustrates, both political coalitions often have drawn upon the same historical sources to put forward their policy positions in contemporary times. Specifically, Fatah has historically framed Islam to be of lesser importance to its overall political motivations than Hamas. On the other hand, Hamas has adopted Islam as its main ideological cohesive bloc that relies and functions upon a form of nationalism. This has proved to be effective in mobilizing a wide variety of sectors of this population, especially young unemployed males. Alshaer shows how this winning of the public has led Hamas to the forefront of Palestinian politics while at the same time has caused Fatah to lose much of its historical credibility.

In the final chapter “Bearing Witness to Al Nakba in a Time of Denial,” Teodora Todorova explains the ways in which the Israeli state narrative has historically dominated the frames behind the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and how this narrative is beginning to lose strength. The year 1948 marks a crucial point in history which included the exclusion of Palestinians from their native land and mass migration of Jewish people back into Jerusalem and the West Bank. Hegemonic Israeli historical accounts and traditional history books have framed 1948 as Israeli’s winning back their nation through a War of Independence and taking land that was “without people.” However, as Todorova effectively illustrates to the reader, recent historical accounts from new Israeli historians have begun to acknowledge the embeddedness of the Palestinian people and their deep ties to Jerusalem. The “Nakba” – a term used to describe the 1948 Palestinian deportation – is a contentious topic and is finally being acknowledged by Israeli proponents

following the Oslo Accords. This is something Todorova shows needs to happen in order for a narrative of coexistence to further enter the Israeli public sphere.

Narrating Conflict in the Middle East is an excellent book composed of a wide variety of perspectives that in the end give the reader a clear idea of how counter-movements and unrepresented segments of civil society may participate in politics, challenge the status quo and receive international acclaim in the process. The focus by the compilation of authors in this book on the topics of discourse and meaning enable us to gain insight into the vast array of often hard to detect international forces that are at play behind politics in this conflict-ridden region. Many previous approaches and theories have focused on mainstream media communications and have not given enough attention to other spaces of expression. This book fills this void by giving the reader different perspectives of the everyday lives of citizens and their societal interaction, and thus creating a significant shift away from “top-down” analyses of one of the most important conflict ridden regions of our times. A recommended read for anyone interested in political activism and how media may shape the Palestinian and Lebanese conflicts.

Alexei Anisin is a PhD student in the Department of Government at the University of Essex. His research focuses on the topic of nonviolent civil resistance and social transition through a discourse theoretic approach. In the past, Alexei has worked for tech start ups in Silicon Valley and is also a reviewer for the ESTRO (Essex University Student Journal). You can find Alexei on Twitter [@AlexeiAnisin](#). [Read more reviews by Alexei](#).